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ABSTRACT

Twenty-five well-educated American mothers living abroad were interviewed to assess the relationship of their various home/career patterns to their overall emotional adjustment. The primary areas investigated as to their impact on adjustment levels included whether or not the women were working, whether or not they were satisfied with their working or nonworking status, and the nature and extent of support they received from husbands, domestic help, and governmental agencies. Findings from open-ended, semistructured interviews suggested that satisfaction with one's home/career patterns was a necessary prerequisite to healthy emotional adjustment. All the women rated poorly adjusted (N=10) were not working, and were highly dissatisfied with this state of affairs (International Casualties). Those rated well-adjusted were either working and happy to be doing so (Happily Working Mothers, N=9) or not working, but by conscious choice (Satisfied Mothers, N=6). The extent to which the husband actively participated in family life, the amount of household help, and the presence of supplementary income were not as critical to women's satisfaction as was the freedom to actively structure their lives in a fashion consistent with their sense of self. (Author)

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Educated American Mothers Abroad: Resolving Parent/Work Role Conflicts[1]

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You are an American woman, in your early thirties, well-educated--career-minded--and the mother of at least one pre-school-age child. If you are a full-time professional with a professional husband you lead a harried but rewarding life (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1969). If you are bright, motivated, but out of work you will most likely be suffering a mild-to-moderate depression (Weissman, Pineus, Redding, Lawrence, Siegel, 1973). If you are a single working mother, chances are good that you will be experiencing difficulties with arrangements--and that you have little social support except from other single mothers.

What would be you fate in these same situations--with the added factor of residence abroad? This is the basic question we pursued in a sample of 25 American mothers living overseas, mostly in France, during 1974. Our main interest was in the solutions 25 American women worked out in order to balance motherhood, other family demands, and any work responsibilities they had. In addition, we wanted to know how satisfied they were with their life patterns and how their satisfaction with their solution related to their overall adjustment.

CG 010 297

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These women were part of a larger sample of English-speaking women living in France (and one in Ghana) and the United States who were interviewed by Martha Niss during 1974-1975 for exploration of experiences and attitudes toward pregnancy, childbirth and the early months of parenthood. They were 35 years old, on the average, and well-educated: 12 had BA's, another 6 had MA's and 4 women had earned Ph.D.s. Most had held professional jobs before leaving the USA. Four were single mothers. Several women were extremely wealthy, but others were dependent upon a variety of state subsidies.

Women participated in open-ended, but semi-structured interviews designed to include information about work, family relationships, medical and nursing care desired and received, issues of importance during the first three months post-partum and residual feelings about pregnancy, birth and adjustment to parenthood.

We assessed three main variables to examine these women's home/career patterns.

1. Career status: working or not working, part- or full-time current job situation voluntarily chosen or not.

2. Each woman's satisfaction with her current work/family arrangements: A woman was considered satisfied is she clearly enjoys her current solution, ambivalent, if she showed some discomfort and uncertainty--and dissatisfied if she expressed severe discomfort, felt trapped or wanted to change her current arrangements.

3. Current level of emotional adjustment. This rating included the woman's assessment of her overall emotional state and

ability to function, the "costs" of her current solution--such as chronic fatigue--and our assessment of her ability to meet the demands of her current life and to be herself. Overall adjustment was rated excellent if the woman reported and presented no problem areas of an ongoing nature, moderate, if some conflict was evident, but she was generally holding her own, and poor, if she exhibited many conflicts, and reported or expressed emotional difficulties.

Other factors which were considered in assessing overall adjustment were amount of household help, father's role in childcare (confined to playing? involved with ongoing childcare responsibilities?), and the woman's marital status and marital adjustment. The influence of these factors will be illustrated in the case material to follow.

Our most striking finding was that every woman rated "poorly adjusted" was highly dissatisfied because she was unemployed. By contrast, every woman who was judged "well adjusted" was satisfied with her current home/career solution, whether or not she was employed. In other words, for this sample of 25 women, it appears that an acceptable resolution of the family/work responsibilities is a necessary pre-requisite for basic adjustment.

This finding should be tested by others, both for the consistency of our results and because others have reported that women who wanted to work and were working are not more satisfied than those who wanted to, but were unemployed (Hall and Gordon, 1973).

Our subjects can be placed in three major categories, based on these overall patterns of adjustment.

The first, termed International Casualties (N=10) consists entirely of women who were not working and who were dissatisfied with being at home. Half of this group had severe marital conflict. Seven of the 10 women were rated "poorly adjusted", 3 as "moderately adjusted". All felt locked into their present situation, incapable of change. Stress was not relieved by relative freedom from household chores; as a group they had more household help than the other women, and their husbands tended to take a somewhat active role in the home. A crucial factor seemed to be that they had terminated their careers involuntarily--in many cases because of their husband's overseas transfer. What part-time work they could find was not in their career of choice. Their sense of personal emptiness and their feeling of leading meaningless lives was a striking characteristic.

"Caroline" (all names have been changed) is a typical member of this group. Married to an American lawyer who came to France on fellowship and then became deeply involved in French law, she has been unable to find work in her own field. Her husband, who is very successful, would like to remain in France permanently. She does not object, saying, "After all, he makes the money we all enjoy. He would work less if I could go out and earn his type of salary, but how can I?"

Partly because of their rising standard of living, partly in response to her unhappiness, she has full-time household help, plus babysitting for her two children in their afterschool time. Nonetheless, she remains openly depressed, commenting, "I never need to come home if I don't want to."

The Happily Working Mothers (N=9) were at the opposite end of the continuum. This group included all of the women who continued working following the births of their children and their international move. All were rated as "well-adjusted", and none expressed dissatisfaction with their current home/work arrangements. This group also included the single mothers in the sample. Of the five married women, all but one had husbands who were actively and meaningfully involved in family responsibilities, sharing all aspects of childcare regularly, including such situations as staying home with a sick child on a working day. They did not appear to be volunteers assisting their wives, but as parents with ongoing responsibilities themselves. Household help was utilized to fill the gaps between the demands of running a home and the contributions of both parents. Four of these 5 couples reported moderate or good marital adjustment. One marriage was poor. Seven of the nine women has resettled internationally because they themselves had actively decided to do so. Six of these women came to France because of their own work, which either complemented a husband's career development, or preceeded marriage. The two women who moved because of their husbands' career were able to continue their studies long-distance with minimal interruption and also were willing to take a temporary gap in their own career as an opportunity to have wanted children.

"Margaret" has a Ph.D. and accepted a job offer in France with her husband's blessing. He is a successful artist, and his work is "portable". They have two children, a solid marriage, and adequate help for their two young children. Margaret has thought

a great deal about her life, especially about the emotional costs and complications of her unusual arrangements. She notes that she is often tired, although she has more energy than most people she knows. Her arrangements are vulnerable to sickness on anyone's part (family member or helper) and leave little opportunity for relaxation or spontaneous fun. Furthermore, although she has little external conflict about her responsibilities, she does notice some interesting attitudes in herself.

"I was sick for a month last year, right after the baby", she said. "I really couldn't do anything at home and George had to take over. He got practically no work done during that month. Yet, he didn't seem to resent it, and, in fact, he seemed to enjoy his time with the baby."

"But the strange thing was--when I could do my work again--he went back to his work <u>without a qualm</u>. For him there was no conflict: He could enjoy taking care of the baby singlehandedly--and then he could give it up. For him, there is no guilt--while I--I must confess--always feel a little pang. I worry that maybe the babysitter isn't just right. He interviews babysitters, too. But once, they're hired, he forgets it. So--maybe some of us are still not liberated completely."

This subgroup includes the four unmarried mothers, three of whom were raising their children alone. None of these women has encountered serious difficulty in combining professional and maternal roles. This finding would appear to be in sharp contrast to expectations for single mothers in the United States.

In large part, France's social welfare policies, seem responsible. All mothers receive automatic fully-paid three month maternity leaves. In addition, there are allowances for children, which vary according to whether one or both parents work. A system of state-subsidized or state-licensed day nurseries and childcare workers cannot accomodate the full demand for such facilities in all parts of France, but single parents have priority and can count on their use. The state day nurseries cost a maximum of $10.00/week, and facilities are sufficient to hold down the cost of private care as well. Furthermore, medical bills, lower than similar US medical costs in any case, are nearly fully reimbursed by the national health system, and there is a range of bonuses to cover additional baby costs, such as layette.

Legislated welfare policies are complemented by a general acceptance of single mothers. None of the "unwed" mothers was ever asked her marital status by medical or nursing personnel. All were consistently called "Madame"--and all felt supported by colleagues, as well as married and unmarried friends. None of these women were "on welfare" in the sense of requiring more allowances than was due them. Their needs could be met within the schedule of allowances and priorities available to any mother in their situation.

"Nadine" is a university professor and a single mother with a two year-old son. She commented that her pregnancy was totally unexpected. "In the States, I think I would have had an abortion. But over here it was different. I knew other single mothers, and

I knew that their children were accepted--that the women were not morally criticized. After my initial surprise, it seemed to me that this pregnancy was a gift. I had never expected to be a mother--being unmarried--but now I realized that I would like to have a child."

She utilized the various national health benefits outlined earlier. Thus, she did not siffer economically by becoming a mother. For the most part, she did not suffer socially either--although she did feel lack of support from her family during pregnancy. She notes that she continued to advance in her career after having her child. She feels that her work has been unhindered by motherhood. She feels that she has grown tremendously as a person through her relationship with her son. The main difficulty for her has been the additional strain of carrying full responsibility for her child. For example, her employers have been cooperative in scheduling her classes, so that she can have time with him. But when he needed minor surgery, no amount of cooperation could alleviate the demands of being her son's only parent through his hospital stay and his brief recovery period afterwards.

We have called the third group of women Satisfied Mothers (N=6). Sharing a non-working status with the International Casualties, these women were moderately or nearly completely satisfied with their work/family priorities. All were rated moderately or well adjusted.

Several factors distinguish the two groups of women at home. The Satisfied Mothers appear to have made conscious choices to

put aside their work, frequently with the understanding that the interruption would be temporary. Three of the Satisfied Mothers were working satisfactorily on a part-time basis. Two others had decided against careers before having children. Becoming mothers was part of a life plan for these women and they felt little conflict about their parental roles. With one exception, all felt that their marriages were satisfactory. The one woman with a poor marriage was the only member of the group who appeared to be potentially psychologically upset.

"Amy" had been a secretary for several years after graduating from junior college. She had travelled and worked overseas, and was 25 when she met and married her husband in England. She is pleased to be living overseas, and comfortable with moving the family every few years to another country. She enjoys her small children and feels it was not difficult to give up working because she has had the experience of travelling and earning her own living. Once both children are in school, several years from now, she would like to go back to work and develop an ongoing career.

Previous studies have illustrated the debilitating effects on women when children mature and leave home. Out study suggests that for the well-educated, career-identified young woman, the involuntary loss of professional role can be similarly devastating. In this study, the effects of job loss were compounded by the parallel losses of a familiar cultural milieu and personal support systems.

By contrast, women whose life patterns remained consistent with their core identity following childbirth and international

relocations were able to adjust remarkably well. For these women, home and career roles are complementary, rather than conflicting. Key factors in the successful maintenance of these dual roles given a move abroad appear to be: choice of careers which allow wide latitude in working conditions (part- or full-time, self-employed or working for a firm), adequate inexpensive household help, cultural support for the working mother and agreement between husband and wife as to the life pattern chosen.

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